

Christ the Shaman
Following the Master on a Journey to our Spiritual Roots
Part I

by
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Everything around me was black. That is not to say that there were things around me. If there were, I could not see them. But the blackness was so intense that it seemed that there was nothing around me. It was the blackness of nothingness. I have been in pitch-black rooms before, and though the darkness was similar to that, the feeling was different. A room, no matter how dark, still has dimension to it. Even in total darkness, one can sense floor and walls and ceiling. But this was the blackness of a void.

Despite this intense and vast darkness, I was not afraid. I held on tight to the thick hair on the back of my guide as he took me through this formless, primal darkness. Then just as my mind started to tell me I was seeing nothing because this was nothing, I saw something. A young girl of about five crouched over a soft, beautiful white light. The light had a radiant, crystal shape to it. This pure, gentle light illuminated her face, and I could see that she gazed on it intently. The light was all she had in the darkness. I also knew that the light was all she was. The light was her pure essence. I saw the girl and the light as two separate things, but they were one – one pure, brilliant essence incarnated in a lost, five-year-old girl.

I called to the girl and told her that I was there to bring her home. I assured her that home was safe and good and strong now. Home was who she was, and it was good. Smiling, the girl jumped up ready to go. I told her that before we returned, I wanted to find a companion to come back with her to help her. As soon as I expressed that desire, a snake crawled out of the darkness. He was as black as the void around us, but he had a bright yellow streak like a lightning bolt stretching the length of his back. As soon as I saw the snake, I knew that he had been there with the little girl all along. He was her helper in the darkness, and he would continue to be so in the light.

I reached out, held the two, and pulled them to my heart. Then sitting up, I leaned over the 50-year-old woman lying next to me. I blew the light-essence of the five-year-old girl and Lightning Snake into the chest of the woman. I sat her up and then blew again into the crown of her head. To seal in this pure essence and the power of Lightning Snake, I shook my rattle around her several times. Then leaning close to the ground where she lay, I whispered in her ear, “welcome home.”

Often people ask me, “Father Michael, why did you become a priest?” Being a smarty-pants by nature, I respond, “Because I wanted to sit in the big chair and go to communion first.” But that is just partially true. I do enjoy sitting in the big chair and going to communion first, but those are not the things that called me, even drove me into priesthood. Rather, it was the sense that I had to

do what I did for that woman who was lying on the floor next to me. I had to work with people's souls. I had to help and heal people by bridging the known realities of our every day world and the mysterious, beautiful, and seemingly inaccessible world of the spirit. Long before I ever even knew the word or understood the role, I knew I had to do the work of a shaman.

Fortunately for me, the Vatican stopped burning people at the stake several hundred years ago. And although I hear there is still a rack for stretching people like me in the storage shed behind the Pope's garage, it is covered with cobwebs for lack of use. Good thing too because most good Catholics (and I do consider myself a good Catholic) not only are completely unfamiliar with the ancient spiritual methods of shamanism, but they are suspicious of them as well. But through my own desire to renew my spirit and be a better priest, I have discovered a spiritual treasure. I have discovered the method of and the power behind the miracles of the bible. I have discovered the spiritual charism of Christ and the prophets. I have understood the cosmology of the bible and learned to move through the realm of the spirit just as did Christ and the prophets and saints. I have been able to do all the things our faith tells us we can do but which reason tells us we cannot do, and I have learned that you can do it too. I do this because I am called to it as a priest. But as a priest, I am also called to share and to teach. It is my intention to do just that in this column.

But first, we should define some terms and set some parameters. It is important for us to understand what shamanism is *not*. Shamanism is *not* witchcraft. It is not Satanism. It is not evil or the occult or paganism. It is not New Age philosophy, though the New Age movement has helped to bring it into common awareness. Shamanism is core human spirituality. Its roots go back 30,000, maybe 40,000 years. Shamanism is the foundation of all religious traditions. Mircea Eliade writes: *no religion is completely "new," no religious message completely abolishes the past. Rather, there is a recasting, a renewal, a revalorization, an integration of the elements – the most essential elements! – of an immemorial religious tradition.*¹ That is what shamanism is for me and what I hope it can be for you: a renewal and integration of our catholic biblical, liturgical, and spiritual tradition.

¹ Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton University Press. 1964. p. 12.

Maybe my interest in shamanism is not completely spiritual. I suspect it may also be biological. My father's side of the family is Russian, and the word *shaman* comes into English through Russian from the Tungus people.² Somewhere in my cells, in my genes, is this ancient spirituality. If that is the case, then I have not discovered something but rather remembered something. Shamanism is part of our human heritage, and to explore and practice its methods is to remember who we are and where we come from. Genesis tells us that we came from God into a garden of beauty and perfection centered around the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life has long been, and continues to be, a means of access to the Garden of Eden. In shamanic terms, the Garden of Eden is the Lower World. Eden is not a place lost in the past. Rather, it is lost in a different reality. Our tremendous gifts of reason and logic have caused us to define reality as only that which we can measure and quantify. But the measurable is only a small part of creation. In the practice of our faith, we acknowledge spiritual reality, but I am afraid that is all we do. We merely acknowledge. We use our brains to say that there is a spiritual reality, but we relegate it to a lost, biblical past or the confines of institutional religion. But shamanism reminds us that we are so much more than our brains, and so to practice shamanism is to use a part of ourselves different from our rational brain to return to that primal place of original goodness, to return to Eden. In Eden, we encounter all that our spiritual parents Adam and Eve knew – an earthly paradise, interaction with the creatures of land, sea, and sky, and communion with God and the creation that he called good.

Shamanism *remembers* in the sense opposite of *dismember*. In the story of the Fall, humanity is dismembered. Adam and Eve are cut off from Eden and from God, and humanity becomes isolated from the creator and very creation to which it belongs. But shamanism remembers Eden and our original unity with the creator and his creation. In the practice of shamanism, one can travel to the Lower World, visit Eden, and unite once again with creation.

This personal experience of remembering is in imitation of the greatest shaman of our tradition. Just as shamanism is in my Russian DNA, so too is shamanism in the flesh and blood and bones of Jesus. The gospels tell a shamanic story. Jesus comes from the upper world into the middle world. He teaches about a non-ordinary reality that he calls the *Kingdom*. He does healing work in the form of extractions, depossessions, and soul retrievals. He sacrifices his very self on the cross – the tree that links the upper, middle, and lower worlds. He descends into the lower world and ascends to the upper world uniting all. Lastly, he tells us to do the same.

As church, we are the Body of the Risen Christ. Therefore, our spiritual work is the work of Christ. We can do the exact same things he did if we learn how he did them. Rather than surrendering the ministry and miracles of Christ to a distant past, we can do them in a present, alternate reality, and the methodology of shamanism allows this.

Hopefully, this little introduction has engaged your curiosity. But it is only an introduction and, in only the most superficial sense, a theory. But the primal

² Ibid. p. 4.

spiritual experience of shamanism is not about theory. It is about practice. The following two articles will take us into the practice of shamanism and demonstrate how this practice fits perfectly with and can tremendously reinvigorate the practice of our Catholic faith.

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